

Employee Spotlight: Gene Ortega

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The eyes have it

Gene Ortega paints portraits rich in color and symbolism.

“My style is chaotic with a bit of refinement,” says Gene, a systems engineer in Facility System Engineering. “It can be almost photo-realistic, but you can see the brushstrokes and the texture in it, and the chaos and the anger.”

Gene’s vivid paintings explore religious iconography and Day of the Dead motifs in portraits, often drawing on the imagery of saints, the Virgin Mary, and Christ that surrounded him growing up. He strives for realism and anatomical accuracy, “so they’re a human figure, not just an image,” he says. “With the religious paintings, I keep the traditional colors and profiles but change enough to make them modern.”

Gene says his paintings don’t come alive until he gets the eyes right. Sometimes that magic moment happens late at night, when he prefers to paint. “The next day I’ll say,

'Last night that painting took a breath,' " he says. "I focus on the eyes because they give the painting a soul."

Gene started sketching his favorite rock album covers and sports stars, but he found formal art classes frustrating and stifling.

"Go paint!"

"The instructors were always saying, 'No, no, paint this way,' " he says. "They wanted you to paint like them." But Gene had his own passionate ideas about art, which found full expression when he began studying with the painter George Yepes.

Gene discovered Yepes through an album cover that "floored" him—the skeletons and roses imagery that adorns the now-classic Mexican folk record "La Pistola y El Corazón," by the rock band Los Lobos. The painting had "a totally different spin" on familiar Day of the Dead imagery, Gene says. "It was more full-figure, which is not seen often—it's usually just the face. It got my attention, that and the colors and the chaotic nature of the way he painted, the strong strokes."

"When I dive into the chaotic part, that's the artistic side, but when I do the finishing refinement, that's the engineering side."

By 1996, Gene had earned an engineering degree from New Mexico State University and had a corporate job in Los Angeles. He began studying with Yepes at Academia de Yepes, contributed to a large mural at NASA, and showed his own paintings at galleries in East LA.

"George showed me the tools and techniques, then said, 'Go paint!'" Gene recalls.

Homecoming

Gene moved back to the Española area in 2011 to take an engineering position at TA-55. He's glad to be back among friends and family and the easily accessed solitude of the New Mexico mountains. This summer he will show his art at the Contemporary Hispanic Market in Santa Fe in late July, and he has a portrait in El Retrato Neuvomexicano Ahora (New Mexican Portraiture Now), a show at the National Hispanic Culture Center in Albuquerque.

Medieval saints seem a long way from TA-55, but for Gene, there's no paradox. "I thought the engineering side of me and the artistic side were going to fight," he says, "but they are the best complement I could wish for. When I dive into the chaotic part, that's the artistic side, but when I do the finishing refinement, that's the engineering side."

Gene Ortega is a systems engineer in the Facility System Engineering group (ES-55).

Resources

- Learn more about Gene's art at his [website](#).
- The portraiture exhibition [El Retrato Nuevomexicano Ahora](#) features 11 New Mexican artists and has been extended through June 12, 2016, by popular demand.

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